



EXHIBIT 4
2/20/07
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February 20, 2007

Re: HB 649 – Revise Child Abuse Reporting Laws

Dear Committee Members:

I would like to thank Representative Sinrud for sponsoring this most important legislation and the members of the Local Government Committee for allowing me to speak on HB 649.

First STEP Resource Center is a Children's Advocacy Center in Missoula, Montana, serving child victims of abuse. In 2005, First STEP Resource Center responded to 245 reports of child abuse. In 2006, First STEP responded to 271 reports of child abuse. At First STEP, we provide both forensic interviews and forensic medical exams, along with advocacy and referrals for follow up services.

First STEP is modeled after the National Children's Alliance Standards for Children's Advocacy Centers providing a multidisciplinary team approach to child abuse investigations and response. Children's Advocacy Centers have been identified as a best practice model for child abuse investigations by:

- Office for Victims of Crime, Department of Justice
- International Association of Chiefs of Police
- Child Welfare League of America
- National Children's Alliance
- Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention

Prior to Missoula's investigative agencies working as a Multidisciplinary Team, very few reports of child abuse were substantiated or prosecuted. In 2005, 28% of the Missoula cases evaluated at First STEP were substantiated and many more received services through Child and Family Services Division. In 2005, 35% of the cases were in the criminal justice system, with many of them being successfully prosecuted.

HB 649 defines Interdisciplinary Child Protective Teams; a team's need for protocols and procedures for responding to reports of child abuse and neglect, and clarifies various components of that response.

I support HB 649 with the following points for consideration:

- Section 1, Page 1, Line 27: The supervisor of child protective services in a local service area or a designee of the Interdisciplinary Child Protective Team, rather than the supervisor's designee, shall serve as the team's coordinator.
- Section 1, Page 1, Line 27 – Page 2, Line 4: Per the National Children's Alliance Standards for Multidisciplinary Teams, a representative of the mental health profession, a representative of victim advocacy services and a representative of a Children's Advocacy Center, if available in the local service area, are recommended additions to the team.
- Section 5, Page 3, Lines 13 – 15: When possible, the interview should be conducted by a team member who is trained in a recognized forensic child interviewing training program developed according to a nationally recognized model. The National Children's Alliance does not have a model. The National Children's Advocacy Center does have a model and is one of several nationally recognized models for forensic interview training.

I welcome the additional language proposed in HB 649 on Page 3, Line 20 and 21, and on Page 5, Line 27, securing the investigative records as confidential taking into consideration the health and safety of the child. In the search for the truth in child abuse investigations, Multidisciplinary Teams, or Interdisciplinary Child Protective Teams, must create a safe place for a child to tell of his or her abuse and not re-traumatize the child through indiscriminate releases of records, both written and recorded, that document the child's statements. An indiscriminate release of records breaks the trust between the child and the interviewer that needs to be established for the child to feel safe when telling of his or her abuse.

Thank you for allowing me to express my support and my recommendations.

Sincerely,



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